

# Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art, philosophy and psycho-analysis –  
<https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/>

**Title:** The event of interpellation: an aesth-ethic reading of Rilke

**Author:** Dror Pimentel

**Section:** Academic articles

**Abstract:** Contrary to Levinas, the event of hospitality does not take place in the face of the other, but rather, in the work of art. Art should therefore not be viewed as provoking pleasure, but rather, as an event of hospitality of radical alterity possessing the power to shake the foundation of its viewers. This is what endows art with an ethical dimension, articulated in re-inscribing aesthetics as “aesth-ethics.” Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” is as a perfect example of this claim. The statue is teeming with life and sexuality, from which a gaze bursts out, shaking the viewer’s existence by calling him to change his life. As Althusser’s analysis of interpellation shows, the subject is constituted from a call coming from the outside. However, in Rilke’s case, the call does not originate from the Big Other, regulating the order, but from radical alterity residing outside the order.

**Keywords:** Rilke; interpellation; event; ethics; alterity

Copyright © 2022 Pimentel.

**Correspondence:** Dror Pimentel, e: [drorpimn@post.bezalel.ac.il](mailto:drorpimn@post.bezalel.ac.il).

**Received:** 7 August, 2021.

**Accepted:** 27 August, 2021.

**Published:** 15 January, 2022.

**How to cite:** Pimentel, Dror. “The event of interpellation: an aesth-ethic reading of Rilke.” *Inscriptions* 5, no. 1 (January 2022): 11–16.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

# The event of interpellation: an aesth-ethic reading of Rilke

Dror Pimentel<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Contrary to Levinas, the event of hospitality does not take place in the face of the other, but rather, in the work of art. Art should therefore not be viewed as provoking pleasure, but rather, as an event of hospitality of radical alterity possessing the power to shake the foundation of its viewers. This is what endows art with an ethical dimension, articulated in re-inscribing aesthetics as “aesth-ethics.” Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” is as a perfect example of this claim. The statue is teeming with life and sexuality, from which a gaze bursts out, shaking the viewer’s existence by calling him to change his life. As Althusser’s analysis of interpellation shows, the subject is constituted from a call coming from the outside. However, in Rilke’s case, the call does not originate from the Big Other, regulating the order, but from radical alterity residing outside the order.

**Keywords:** Rilke; interpellation; event; ethics; alterity

## The Dionysian Apollo

Does art merely provoke pleasure, or is it within its power to create an event that will shake the foundations of its viewers’ experience? This second possibility is attested to in Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” Rilke’s choice of the artifacts serving as the objects of his early poetic meditations was far from coincidental. As Paul de Man notes, these objects are all distinguished by some type of absence, and hence could be termed “negative objects.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of the poem devoted to the torso of Apollo – which Rilke likely came upon during a visit to the Louvre while living in Paris – this absence is evident in the tension between its current existence as a truncated torso with no head, limbs, or thighs, and its ideal perfection before being

marred by the vicissitudes of time.

Before turning to discuss the poem, let us read it first in its entirety:

We cannot know his legendary head  
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso  
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,  
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise  
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could  
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs  
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced  
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders  
and would not glisten like a wild beast’s fur:

<sup>1</sup>Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 44.

would not, from all the borders of itself,  
burst like a star: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.<sup>3</sup>

In his description of the statue, Rilke underscores its vitality and movement, despite its imperfection. This is especially noticeable in the description of the eyes and sexual organ, which appear to entertain relations of exchangeability. The vitality of the eyes is underscored by the slight linguistic diversion in their description: the German word for the pupil of the eye, *Augäpfel*, literally means “the apple of the eye.” Rilke, however, uses its plural form – *Augenäpfel* – thus contributing to its detachment from its narrow anatomical context and its diversion to an organic context, as if the eyes were indeed apples. The vitality of the statue is further enhanced by the allusion to its sexual organ – “that dark center where procreation flared” – which contributes to the eroticization of the statue. The emphasis on the central location of the sexual organ is also justified in its poetic context: just as the sexual organ is located at the center of the body, so it is mentioned in the middle of the sonnet.

One cannot ignore the philosophical context of this emphasis on sexuality, which is further amplified by the disturbing absence of the head from the torso. The absence of the head enables us to identify the statue with the mythical entity of the *acephalous* (Greek for “headless one”), whom Georges Bataille transformed into a symbol negating the privileged status of reason and reinvesting the body with value. The privileging of the sexual organ over the head also echoes Nietzsche’s critique of the glorification of reason in Western cul-

ture, heralding its apocalyptic demise during the fin-de-siècle. This preference casts a sort of Dionysian spell upon Apollo, who is transported from the realm of celestial brilliance, becoming saturated with sexuality.

The vitality of the statue is also evident in the inner movement pervading the body’s different parts: chest, thighs and shoulders. Each of these is mentioned in the poem in its genitive form (“of”): the curve *of* breast; the placidity *of* the thighs; the cascade *of* the shoulders. The genitive case allows each body part in turn to recede into the background while underscoring the movement that pervades it. In this manner, the statue’s parts are transformed into a living entity that contains a current of movement, while the statue as a whole is suffused with movement like a living organism. To this, one must add the movement stemming from the displacement of the statue’s different parts: the smile has run through the thighs to that dark center where procreation flared. The smile has a life of its own, which is not dependent on the body part carrying it. Just like the Cheshire cat’s smile in *Alice in Wonderland*, it continues to live in the statue’s body even after its face has been removed: its journey ends in the sexual organ, which becomes its carrier in place of the lips.

## The Seeing Body

Like the smile, the gaze too is displaced, moving from the face to suffuse the entire torso with the act of seeing: “there is no place that does not see you.” The gaze hosted in the torso is what endows it with life and movement. How should this act of seeing be understood? De Man identifies the seeing statue with

<sup>3</sup> Translated by Stephen Mitchell. In German: “Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,/ darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber/ sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,/ in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,// sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug/ der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen/ der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen/ zu jener Mitte, die Zeugung trug.// Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz/ unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz/ und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;// und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern/ aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,/ die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.” Rilke, “Archaischer Torso Apollos,” *Neue Gedichte*, 83.

the mythological figure of Argus, whose one-hundred eyes were scattered over his entire body.<sup>4</sup> Yet this reading still perpetuates the fundamental difference between being seen and seeing, whereas the image delineated by Rilke overcomes the distinction between them. The entire statue sees because it is at once being seen and seeing: it exists in a state of seeing visibility, in which the object supplying the gaze with a surface of visibility is itself possessed of the ability to see.

One can even assume that the statue's seeing ability is located in its sexual organ, as if it were a pupil focusing the act of seeing that radiates from the entire statue. The displacement of the gaze onto the torso, and even more so, onto the sexual organ, contributes to overturning the hierarchy of organs taking place in the statue. Vision has always been considered the most important sense, due to its identification with thought. The perceiving organ is not the eye of the flesh, but rather the eye of thought, which has the power to capture the transcendent dimension of reality. This oculocentric stance, which positions vision at the center, can be found, for instance, in the writing of both Plato and Descartes. In Rilke's case, the privileged status of vision is negated when it is displaced from the head to the body, and more specifically to the sexual organ. The acephalous sees through the phallus.

Yet can a statue indeed see? The trivial answer, of course, is no. Only a subject can see in the deep sense, which involves not only the photoelectric process of vision, but also the act of endowing what is seen with meaning. Cameras, robots, and animals possess mechanisms of seeing, be they mechanical or physiological, yet this does not lead to the conclusion that they can see. The attribution of seeing to the torso of Apollo is thus an unsustainable claim, due to its status as an object that merely represents a

subject, but is not a subject himself.

Yet what if, in the spirit of Heidegger, we were to examine the work of art not as a representation of the thing, but rather as its presentation. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger argues that the statue at the center of a Greek temple is not a mimetic image of the god but rather hosts the god himself, in his being.<sup>5</sup> If we examine the torso of Apollo in this same spirit, we can view it not as a representation of the god, but as his actual manifestation. The brilliance suffusing the torso must thus not be identified with the Apollonian illusion, as Nietzsche would have it, but rather, with the appearance of divinity itself. This possibility resonates with the Greek term *agalma*, which is related to the Greek view of the statues of their gods as entities filled with life, which bridge the gap between the human and the divine.

And what is this gaze if not the gaze of radical alterity associated with primordial, pre-cultural Being, gazing out from the torso of Apollo? The gaze hosted in the statue's body, displaced onto the shoulders, breast and thighs, infusing them with life and constituting their dazzling visibility. Finally, it lands on the sexual organ, only to erupt, like the light of a star, shattering the frame of the statue and shaking the very foundations of the viewer. Together with the gaze, the statue also hosts the primordial world that is carried by it. All that remains of this world is the torso, animated by a spectral gaze that traverses time, as it restores a shadow of visibility to a world that once was and is no longer. This gaze is that of a panopticon in the double sense of this term: it does not only see *everywhere*, but also sees *from everywhere*.

## Aesth-ethic Interpellation

The statue not only sees, but also speaks. The gaze commands: "You must change your life."

<sup>4</sup> de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 167–8.

This is not a moral command but rather, an ethical command, in Levinas' sense of "ethics."<sup>6</sup> Yet in Rilke's case – and this is the decisive point – the ethical command is not transmitted through the face of the other, but rather, through the body of the statue. This is the moment in which ethics is transformed into aesth-ethics: the term "aesth-ethics" must be understood as a displacement of the event of the hospitality of radical alterity from the face of the other to the work of art. Ethics is thus not related to aesthetics due to any kind of compatibility between the good and the beautiful. For ethics is not related to the good, but rather to a radical alterity that lies beyond good and evil. Moreover, aesthetics in this case is by no means related to the beautiful, but rather, to the event of hospitality of that radical alterity. In this sense, ethics is related to aesthetics since, as Rilke's poem reveals, the ethical command is transmitted by means of art.

The difference lies not only in the mode of transmitting the ethical command, but also in its contents: the statue calls upon the viewer to instigate a radical change in his life. Levinas' reading of the other and Rilke's reading of the statue thus have something in common, for in both cases, the response to the call leads to the constitution of the subject. Yet there is still a significant difference between them: in Levinas' case, the origin of the call is a God without being, who is identified with the good and with justice. In Rilke's case, meanwhile, the origin of the call lies in a radical alterity beyond good and evil. In Levinas' case, the call is transmitted through the other's face, that is, in the ethical sphere. In Rilke's case, the call is transmitted, as noted, through Apollo's torso, that is, through the aesthetic sphere. What distinguishes Rilke is that the constitution of selfhood takes place in a face-to-face (or more precisely, face-to-body) encounter with the work

of art. The power of art stems from its ability to instigate in the viewer a radical change, which leads him to encounter his selfhood for the first time.

Art thus has an interpellative character. Yet interpellation in Rilke's poem is not the same as that defined by Althusser.<sup>7</sup> For the latter, interpellation occurs in an encounter with a representative of the state, such as a policeman. When the policeman calls out "Hey, you," to a passerby in the street, his call is not addressed to a specific person, and there is thus no duty to attend to it. Yet Althusser believes that in nine out of ten cases, the person being called to will stop short and turn to the policeman, even though he is not obligated to do so.

The moment of answering the call, which is a moment of interpellation, is also a moment of identification, in at least three different senses: firstly, the passerby in the street identifies himself as the person being addressed by the call, even though it was not necessarily addressed to him. Secondly, in identifying himself as such, he identifies with the existing order represented by the policeman. Thirdly, this is also the moment in which the passerby acquires his own identity, and is transformed from an individual into a subject residing within the social order. Identity is thus tied to identification: the one being called knows who he is by virtue of his identification with the state and its laws. The subject is not constituted autonomously, but rather, in a specular manner, by encountering the mechanisms of the state and their representatives.

Religion can similarly be examined as an ideological mechanism that transforms the believer through the practice of ritual: the believer knows he was created by the God in whom he must believe, and that in return he will be awarded God's love. The scene of the Burning Bush appearing in Exodus 3 is viewed

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194–219.

<sup>7</sup> Althusser, "On Ideology," 171–208.

by Althusser as an exemplary case of religious interpellation. Following Moses' declaration of his identity before God ("Here I am,"), God identifies himself as an absolute subject that cannot be defined by anyone but himself ("I am who I am"), while identifying Moses as the one who must faithfully follow his commands.<sup>8</sup> In this manner, Moses comes to know himself as a subject who has been transformed into God's servant. Althusser does ponder the possibility of also considering interpellation in an aesthetic context. One can assume that in his view art, like religion, can serve as an ideological mechanism that transforms individuals into subjects.

Yet the interpellation occurring before the torso of Apollo does not resemble any of these cases. Radical alterity erupts from the statue as a spectral gaze, commanding the viewer to change his life. The statue's command is thus the inversion of God's words in the scene of the Burning Bush: God addresses himself as the sole authority possessing the power to constitute his identity, without any fixed, a-priori definition: "I am who I am." In doing so, he constitutes Moses as his servant, without allowing him to determine his identity for himself. The statue, by contrast, addresses itself to the viewer, commanding him to transgress himself without determining the nature of this transgression. It thus frees the viewer from existing forms of determination, endowing him with the freedom to be himself: "You are who you are."

Interpellation as defined by Althusser – which takes place in the social and religious spheres – validates the subject's identification with the social order, and in doing so endows the subject with his identity. Interpellation as defined by Rilke – which occurs in the aesthetic sphere – leads the subject to his singular self, and in doing so distinguishes him from the social order. Althusser is thus right in argu-

ing that interpellation originates from a radical alterity residing outside any given order. Yet this is not the Big Other, the one who is at once constituting the order and existing outside of it. Rather, this is the radical and primordial alterity, which precedes all forms of order and economy. The origin of the call is the call of the origin. Althusser is right in stating that interpellation has the character of an event. Yet the event of interpellation, in this case, does not confirm the order, but rather disrupts it. Althusser is right in arguing that the event of interpellation constitutes the subject. Yet this is not a subject returned to the order to obey the Big Other, but rather, a disrupted subject whose place in the order is put into question.

The event of interpellation thus constitutes a disrupted subject, who is not fully integrated into the order. His constitution involves his exclusion from the order, as one who was never included in it, or who has long abandoned it. The order of those excluded from the order includes Kierkegaard's Abraham, Camus' Stranger, and Kafka's Josef K., to mention a few of them by name. To these, one must add the viewer of Apollo's torso, who can reasonably be assumed to be Rilke himself. These figures all witness the event of the hospitality of radical alterity taking place in art and attest to its eventuation. In this sense, being a subject means being a witness to the event. Rilke is given a double role, both as the witness of the event of the hospitality of radical alterity in Apollo's torso, and as the one attesting to the event in his poem. This double role points to the affinity between art and the event, and thus also between art and bearing witness. The work of art can thus be examined as the work of bearing witness to the event.

## References

Althusser, Louis. "On Ideology." In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and*

<sup>8</sup> Althusser, 194–9.

- Ideological State Apparatuses*, translated by G. M. Goshgarian, 171–208. New York: Verso, 2014.
- Man, Paul de. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The origin of the work of art.” In *Basic Writings*, edited by David F. Krell, 139–212. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. “Archaischer Torso Apollon.” In *Neue Gedichte*, S. 83. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1907/8.
- 

Copyright © 2022 Pimentel.

**Correspondence:** Dror Pimentel, e: [drorpimn@post.bezalel.ac.il](mailto:drorpimn@post.bezalel.ac.il).

**Received:** 7 August, 2021.

**Accepted:** 27 August, 2021.

**Financial statement:** The scholarship for this article was conducted at the author’s own expense.

**Competing interests:** The author has declared no competing interests.

**How to cite:** Pimentel, Dror. “The event of interpellation: an aesth-ethic reading of Rilke.” *Inscriptions* 5, no. 1 (January 2022): [11–16](#).

## Ereignis Institute

Ereignis Institute prepares the ground for enhanced perception and the good life. We provide short, incisive lectures available at your convenience, with optional readings and easy access to instructors. Our approach to the question of how to live well owes much to the ethical tradition from Epicurus: friendly to science, fiercely sense-oriented, and dedicated to the presumption that our actions are oriented towards achieving pleasure and peace of mind.

- Philosophies of life technologies: 12 week course module with Dr. Torgeir Fjeld €100.
- Ethics after Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality I: Eight lectures with Dr. Mehdi Parsa €100.

[institute.ereignis.no/](http://institute.ereignis.no/)

### *Hedgehogs* by Christopher Norris

*Hedgehogs* is a sequence of poems and verse-essays about Jacques Derrida. Witty, ironic, reflective, discursive, and narrative in character Christopher Norris offers fresh points of engagement for philosophers and literary critics.

E-book €8.50 / Softbound €17.70

[utopos.tankebanen.no/](http://utopos.tankebanen.no/)

### Support independent publishing

*Inscriptions* is a peer-reviewed journal run and funded wholly by enthusiasts. While the journal is open access and free of author fees our beautiful print version can be ordered from our distributor. Support the journal by subscribing.

One year (two issues) €40

[inscriptions.tankebanen.no/](http://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/)